

-- A.Y. JACKSON and ARTHUR LISMER --

Arthur Savage

7th Lecture

A.Y.JACKSON and ARTHUR LISMER

A lot of water has passed under the bridge since the days when the first stirring moments of discovering Canada in paint came to the enthusiastic group of painters known as the Group of Seven.

For fifteen years they trekked all over the country; they held their exhibitions and out-faced a storm of adverse criticism, confident, as artists have to be, if they are to educate people, that they were on the right track, and that some day a finer understanding of our own land would through their labours come to be the possession of all of us. This is really why the artist is ahead of his time. He has to be able to see with a vision, a far-sightedness that common folk like ourselves have not got.

One of the leading figures in the Art world of Canada to-day, is that of A.Y.JACKSON. From the day twenty-five years ago when he first encouraged the doubting Thomson, he had never spared energy or time to the development of the cause of painting in this country.

His family history stretches back to the early days in Upper and Lower Canada. His forbears pioneered in the development of the country, building the first railways and taking an active part in commercial and educational life. From his early youth Jackson had been stirred by tales of Canadian achievement and he was always possessed of an unquenchable enthusiasm for the beauty and character of the Canadian landscape.

After his student days in Chicago and Paris were over he came back to his native Montreal to start in to work. It was while on a sketching trip in the Eastern Townships that he painted a canvas, "The Edge of the Maple Wood", which later attracted the attention of Lawren Harris and J.E.H.MacDonald. Harris bought the canvas and later met Jackson

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and persuaded him to join the Toronto Group.

Jackson and Thomson made a wonderful combination. Jackson, equipped with control of his medium and his instinctive love of the outdoor world, recognized the genius of Thomson and gained much from his contact with him.

The crisis of 1914 brought Jackson from the North to enlist in the 60th Battalion. Valcartier, the mud and rain of Bramshot Camp, France, and finally Sanctuary Wood and a piece of shrapnel landed him in a hospital at Etaples. Invalided to England, he was about to return to France when he was transferred to the Canadian War Records Branch as an artist, where he made an important contribution painting the devastation of the war area.

1919 saw Jackson back in Toronto picking up the broken threads. Thomson's loss was a challenge to all artists and he set right in to develop their early ambitions.

His first important work was a canvas called "Entrance to Halifax Harbour". It was painted shortly after his return, showing the boats in the Harbour before they had discarded their camouflage. The scattered village of frame-houses and the patches of wet snow make a bold pattern full of changing colour. This canvas brought to Canada the honour of being the first canvas purchased by the Tate Gallery for their permanent collection.

Then began the tremendous task of studying every aspect of the country, and as a result, few can know it as thoroughly and intimately as Jackson. East, West and North his sketching trips have made an intricate network trail from the Maritimes to the Pacific. On the west coast he has worked as far as Alaska, and on

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the Atlantic sea-board he has twice travelled up the sombre iceberg strewn shores of Labrador and so on to the Arctic Circle. He has sketched in the Rockies and the foothills, has worked up the Skeena River through the Indian country, and has painted in the little fishing villages on the Gaspé Coast, on the barren rock-bound shores of Lake Superior and round the lakes, rivers and mining towns of Northern Ontario. He has gone as far as the Great Slave and Great Bear Lakes in the Northwest Territories and returned with equal zest to the wind-blown islands of the Georgian Bay. But his native province, Quebec, calls him back at least once a year, and he yearly brings in a raft of sketches - the country itself in all its changing conditions of light, contour and snow. The subjects that Morrice made so fascinating have been handled here in a different fashion. Not only can Jackson give us the soft gentleness of the opalescent snow-bank, but he analyses the snow under every condition and delights in handling the curled edges of great sweeping drifts, the sheen on the ice-caked roads and the fierce sombreness of the Arctic night, cold and cruel.

Once a year the good ship *Boethic* made the long trip up to Baffin Land, taking supplies and relieving the police who patrol those lonely shores, and Jackson has travelled that route twice. Sir Frederick Banting who accompanied him on his first trip North gives the following note on his work:

"Sketching was done under considerable difficulty; cold and wind would have chilled the enthusiasm of a less ardent worker. Jackson cherished an illusion that the finest colour is generally to be found on the most exposed spots. A restless

desire to find what lies beyond the distant hills makes it difficult to keep up with him."

In his canvas, "The Beothic", Jackson shows us the dark wedge-shaped form of the ship contrasting with the fantastic group of ice-forms surrounding it and reflecting strange green lights, while the sky breaks in a series of sombre clouds of rhythmic movement. In another canvas of the same trip we are shown the clear aqua green water reflecting masses of the purest white bergs dazzling in their brilliance, while in a third a group of Esquimos and their dogs huddle beside their igloos, or again a little grey church planted firmly on the rocks lifts its sturdy tower against the bleak coast. It wasn't all sombre; the weird beauty of the Northern night is broken by stretches of pink and yellow rock holding strange Arctic plants in their crevices.

But Jackson's interpretation of his own province, Quebec, is perhaps his greatest contribution. He gives it to us in every phase and mood, the grand and rugged and yet friendly hills of the Laurentians deep in snow which fills every hollow and valley with a rolling, swinging pattern of beauty, sympathetically reflecting the changing colour of the sky, with the blue brilliance of the St. Lawrence flowing by. He has preserved for us the quaintness of the French villages which are fast disappearing and being replaced by modern buildings. The old barns and the wandering rail fences, the winter roads leading into the heart of the rolling uplands - it would be impossible to tell you of all the motives. Jackson exemplifies the Constable tradition of close observation of the outdoor world and as a result he never lacks for variety; he never falls into the theatrical vein; he depends for his drama upon the quality of the conditions which he finds and so

he plays in many keys.

He carries the movement to its fullest development. In him we see subjects of motive with a strong robust handling, delighting in the solid planes and great contours of the rolling land.

Usually in his canvases you will find some human interest unlike to Thomson who gave us Nature remote and solitary. Jackson shows us our Canadian life contending with and surrounded by the great spirit of the land itself sometimes dark and brooding, sometimes gentle and lyrical, but always beautiful.

Before the Group of Seven disbanded in 1933, Edwin Holgate of Montreal became a member, and later it developed into a larger society promoting the same ideas. Jackson is the President of that Society to-day known as the Canadian Group of Painters.

This last Autumn saw Jackson flying into Great Bear Lake. This Spring will see him back again in Quebec his tireless spirit always revealing something more.

ARTHUR LISMER was the member of the Group who felt strongly that this larger vision should not be reserved for the select few, but that it should be spread throughout the land. Every child in Canada, he believed, should be given a chance to see and feel and express himself or herself in the Plastic Arts. He declared that all should be brought into contact with beauty of line and form and colour, and that a generation of young Canadians should learn to value things of creative thought. Our schools should realize the need for work of this type and so in later life these young people would not have to look for their entertainment, but would fill each possible spare

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minute with some form of creative work and from it derive a satisfaction and joy which nothing else can give.

Arthur Lismer came from Yorkshire to Canada in 1908. He had studied at the Art schools in Sheffield and Antwerp. He joined the firm of Grip Limited, but he was never intended for a commercial artist. During the War he obtained the position of Director of the Halifax Art School, which position he held until the war ended. In spite of the demands on his time made by teaching, Arthur Lismer made a great contribution to our store of fine canvases. His "Isles of Spruce", a Gothic-like mass of black pointed spruce on an island in Algoma, and "The September Gale" where he paints the full force of a storm over the Georgian Bay, reveal the exuberance of his personality.

Later he became Assistant-Director of the Ontario College of Art in Ontario, and for ten years directed the activities for children and adult education. Every summer three hundred teachers from Ontario attended the Summer Course and returned to their classes equipped with new stimulus and a better idea of how Art might be properly understood.

He travelled from coast to coast teaching and always planting the idea of "see things for yourself and don't be afraid of expressing them."

The children's Saturday morning classes at the Toronto Art Gallery conducted by Arthur Lismer and his able staff was one of the outstanding educational accomplishments of the country. As many as five hundred children were given the opportunity to express themselves freely in paint. I shall never forget dropping in one morning and

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seeing a whole gallery full of energetic small people sitting on the floor painting away to their heart's content. Pageants and Festivals of all kinds were produced by the students and the Children's Art Centre became a hive of activity and interest.

He attended the Educational Conference at Nice in 1931 and in Capetown, South Africa in 1933. Later the Carnegie Corporation sent him to spend a year in South Africa and organize an educational programme for the Arts.

But a personality of his quality was not to be found easily and other fields larger and perhaps more appreciative than our own took him away from us. Columbia University in New York offered him the position of Director of Art Education and he accepted it though loath to leave the country which he had made his own. But he went knowing at least that he had equipped a group of people capable of carrying on his ideals and that he had planted a seed in the Art education of the country that would some day have a great flowering.

He left us last September. It was a great loss and yet we have come to realize that after all the people of this continent are one and that Arthur Lismer may act as one of the connecting links between the two countries in the world of the Arts where there is neither black nor white, bond nor free. The invisible strands that to-day link free living democracies are precious and are in danger. Not the least of them is the special kind of liberation for mind and spirit with which Art endows us all.
